

Summary of the 34th edition of the Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands (DTN34), 7 November 2013

Threat level

The threat level in the Netherlands remains 'substantial', meaning that the chance of an attack remains real. The current threat to the Netherlands is still primarily jihadist in nature. The reasons for raising the threat level in March 2013 still apply for the period under review. In some cases the situation has actually deteriorated during this period.

Firstly, the key factor determining the threat situation at this time remains the involvement of foreign jihadists in the Syrian conflict. Dutch nationals are still travelling to Syria with jihadist intentions. In August the number of jihadists leaving the Netherlands for Syria rose again in comparison with the preceding months. A growing number of Dutch jihadists in Syria are thought to be fighting under the flag of Jabhat al-Nusra (JaN), an al Qa'ida (AQ) ally that seeks to wage violent global jihad. The possible return of these jihadists could affect the threat to Europe and the Netherlands in particular. Of course, returning combatants from other EU countries could also engage in terrorist activities in the Netherlands, either on their own initiative or at the direction of others. In the period under review, Dutch jihadists with combat experience began returning to the Netherlands from Syria for the first time. They are being monitored closely.

Secondly, there are troubling indications of increasing radicalisation among small groups of young Muslims in the Netherlands, a trend previously cited in DTN32. Over the past few months there has been a sharp rise in the amount of propaganda on the internet (including social media) that openly urges participation in the conflict in Syria. The open manifestation of pro-jihadist sentiments by young people in the Netherlands would seem to suggest increased self-confidence and militancy on their part. Since jihadist propagandists often present their extremist ideas in a concealed manner, employing strategic allusions to present-day hot spots like Syria, the reach of their propaganda is even greater. A positive factor is that large swaths of the Muslims community are resilient to this jihadist message, even when packaged in more refined terms.

Thirdly, developments in some countries in the Middle East and jihadist conflict zones have a negative impact on the present threat assessment. In the period under review Westerners fell victim to terrorist violence in places like Pakistan and Kenya. Developments in Syria remain especially worrisome. Over the past few months jihadist groups like the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and JaN have become more

dominant in the north of the country. Although these groups aim to carry out attacks in the West and against Western interests, for now their priority is the war in Syria. The terrorist threat to Western targets (mainly embassies) in Yemen, which American agencies warned about in early August 2013, is another piece of evidence that Al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) seeks to attack Western (including Dutch) targets. The ongoing instability in Egypt since the ouster of President Mursi continues to play into the hands of jihadists in that country. The number of jihadist attacks in the Sinai has been on the rise, but for the first time in a long period, attacks are also being carried out in other parts of Egypt. There is also a growing threat to Western targets in Egypt. It is conceivable, for example, that jihadists in the Sinai will use surface-to-air missiles to bring down aircraft, including civilian planes. This is regarded as a general threat, not one specifically directed against Dutch aircraft.

Finally, in the eyes of jihadists, the Netherlands remains a legitimate target on account of its involvement in military missions in various Muslim countries, alleged discrimination against Muslims in the Netherlands itself and perceived insults to Islam and the prophet Mohammed. This was underscored by the arrest of a female in July 2013 on suspicion of jihadist recruitment. In response to her arrest, international jihadist websites called for attacks on the Netherlands. Such utterances can also have negative consequences for the Dutch nationals still being held hostage abroad by jihadists.

International context of the jihadist threat

In early August dozens of embassies in the Middle East and North Africa were closed following a threat identified by the United States. According to the US, there was an acute and serious threat of attacks on Western diplomatic missions and Western interests at the time of *Eid al-Fitr*. Eventually, the threat was determined to have originated with AQAP and mainly relate to Yemen. There was no terrorist threat to the Netherlands itself at that time. Around the same time, information about a suspected AQ plot against high-speed trains in Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany and Sweden turned out to be unreliable.

The AQ core, which sees itself as the vanguard of violent international jihad, is trying to use its position to influence branch organisations that are active in the Middle East – with varying success. ISIL, for example, has ignored orders from the AQ core. By contrast, JaN, which is active in Syria, takes its instructions directly from the AQ core. AQAP occupies a special position in all this. While the relationship between AQAP and the AQ core is very close, AQAP does follow its own course. Regardless of the success that the AQ core might be having at any given time in influencing other groups, the centre of

gravity of the core-led worldwide jihad has for some time been shifting from Afghanistan/Pakistan to the Middle East. This shift could offer the AQ core the alluring long-term prospect of bringing the jihadist struggle to the birthplace of Islam. This has negative repercussions for the security of Europe, including the Netherlands, given the geographic proximity of the Middle East.

International threat: Africa and Asia

In certain parts of Syria, jihadist groups, including ISIL and JaN, are becoming ever more dominant. Both groups have demonstrated their intention to carry out attacks in the West and against Western interests. For the time being, however, their priority is the local conflict in Syria. The presence of hundreds of Western jihadists in these groups is a troubling development, considering their international agenda. In time these Western jihadists could be deployed for attacks in the West. At the international level, there has been intense discussion of possibly punishing Syria militarily for allegedly using chemical weapons, as concluded by the US and other countries, in an attack on a neighbourhood on the outskirts of Damascus on 21 August 2013. This looming military intervention was provisionally averted on 9 September 2013, when the Syrian regime accepted a Russian proposal to put all its chemical weapons under international supervision with a view to their eventual destruction. Still, the US is keeping the option of armed action very much open, probably in part as a way of warning the Syrian regime not to engage in any delaying tactics.

Africa is also home to various jihadist groups. For years, these groups have maintained a strong presence in the greater Sahel, the Horn of Africa and Nigeria. As a result of the uprisings in various North African countries, the jihadist networks there have become much more active and operate more and more openly.

In the period under review, jihadist networks in the *Sinai* and other parts of *Egypt* have acquired new momentum thanks to the political crisis that erupted after the military took power and deposed President Mursi on 3 July 2013. There has also been an increase in the number of jihadist attacks in the Sinai. In the period under review, we also saw the first jihadist attacks on state targets outside the Sinai, including an attack on the Egyptian interior minister, who managed to escape unharmed. There is also a growing threat to Western targets in Egypt. In late August, jihadists fired on an Asian freighter in the Suez Canal with a rocket launcher, in the belief that it was a Western vessel. In a counterattack the Egyptian army targeted jihadist groups, both in the Sinai and in other parts of Egypt. In connection with this operation, two Dutch jihadists were arrested on suspicion of

providing financial and logistical support to a terrorist cell in Egypt. It is also conceivable that jihadists in the Sinai may attempt to fire on aircraft, including Western aircraft, with rocket launchers. So far, though, this scenario has not come to pass.

In *Mali* the French military operation has seriously disrupted local jihadist networks. In August 2013 al-Mulathameen (led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar) merged with the Movement for Unity and Jihad in Western Africa (MUJAO) under the name al-Murabitun. It is still unclear whether this merger has increased the groups' operational capabilities. In *Yemen* AQAP has faced military attacks in the form of drones, and several operational leaders have been killed. However, AQAP has shown itself in the past to be a resilient organisation. In *Somalia* violence perpetrated by al Shabaab has only increased, despite internal divisions within the organisation. This violence also extends to international targets. The security situation has deteriorated in both southern and central Somalia. The group has even demonstrated its ability to carry out a terrorist attack outside Somalia. In Nairobi, Kenya, using relatively simple means, they carried out a complex attack on a shopping mall, killing dozens, including a Dutch woman. Dozens of people were also held hostage. The group managed to fend off the Kenyan police and army for several days and attract the attention of the world media. For al Shabaab, the purpose of this attack in Kenya was to punish the country for its military involvement against the group in Somalia.

International threat: Europe and North America

The jihadist attack in Boston on 15 April 2013 (described in DTN33) was yet another illustration of the fact that the jihadist threat to Europe and North America has not diminished. This also fits within a more long-term trend whereby jihadists from the West are increasingly focusing on simple, small-scale attacks, carried out by violent individuals or a small group.

The threat situation in Europe is not determined solely by the jihadist threat. Arrests in the United Kingdom, Germany and France demonstrate once again that far-right motives can also spark terrorist violence. A Ukrainian PhD student, residing in England, has been convicted for the racist murder of an elderly Muslim (April 2013) and placing bombs in three mosques in the British Midlands (June and July 2013). Four Germans, including three known right-wing extremists, are suspected of planning an attack on a meeting of 'political opponents'. It is believed that the attack was to be carried out with the help of a bomb installed in a model aeroplane. It is not yet clear who these 'political opponents' were. In connection with another German terrorism investigation (in this case targeting suspected far-right terrorist group Werewolf Commandos), the residence of a Dutch

national was searched by the authorities. In France a 23-year-old serviceman was arrested on suspicion of planning a terrorist attack on a mosque. The man, a sergeant in the French air force, had sought to open fire on a mosque in a suburb of Lyon during the last day of Ramadan. The suspect is believed to hold 'right-wing ideas that verge on extremism'. He would seem to be a new example of a potentially violent 'lone wolf'.

Threat to the Netherlands

The present threat assessment is largely determined by the involvement of foreign jihadists in the Syrian conflict. Recent developments give cause for concern. In August the number of jihadists leaving the Netherlands for Syria increased once again in comparison with the preceding months. Foreign jihadists who are already in Syria have been trying to encourage their Dutch co-religionists to make the journey too. The fact that more and more Dutch combatants have probably joined JaN means that they are now being more profoundly influenced by the dogma of international jihad. A number of Dutch nationals have shown their willingness to engage in extreme violence. As they remain in Syria, they will gain more combat experience and perhaps be more prepared to take up arms. There are indications that Dutch jihadists have grown more radical during their time in Syria and view the West in general, and the Netherlands in particular, more negatively. The first jihadists with combat experience have already started returning to the Netherlands, and they are being monitored closely. They also form a source of inspiration for potential fighters. Neither the return of disillusioned jihadists from Syria nor the death of jihadist combatants has had a deterrent effect. Online propaganda, on websites and social media, calling for participation in the conflict, shows no signs of abating. In this context Dutch jihadists who were killed in Syria are honoured as martyrs.

In the eyes of jihadists the Netherlands remains a legitimate target on account of its involvement in military missions in various Muslim countries, alleged discrimination against Muslims in the Netherlands itself and perceived insults to Islam and the prophet Mohammed by Dutch people. For these reasons, the Netherlands remains on the radar of the international jihadist movement, though this country is not as prominent a target as the US, Israel or the United Kingdom. Even so, relatively minor incidents can quickly attract the attention of jihadists and even provoke threats, such as recently demonstrated by the arrest of Shukri F. (alias 'Oum Usama') on 17 July 2013, on suspicion of recruiting for jihad. In response to this, international jihadist websites called for attacks on the Netherlands. After F.'s release, the online outcry died down quickly.

Violent radicalisation and polarisation

The open display of pro-jihadist views and symbols in Dutch society is a point of concern. This trend has been observed in both the virtual world and in the public sphere. In the period under review, an increase was noted in the use of Facebook by Dutch nationals who openly sympathise with violent jihad, principally in Syria. The site is used to report on the conflict in Syria, disseminate jihadist propaganda and, more generally, to glorify the movement of foreign fighters to jihadist conflict zones. Examples of public activity are rallies at athletic fields where jihadist flags are displayed. The fact that young people are assembling in a public place, in part to air their extremist ideas, can be regarded as a sign of their self-confidence and militancy.

There are no indications that individuals associated with the far right or with the extremist wing of the asylum rights or animal rights movements are evolving towards terrorism. There has been some unlawful activity, however. With regard to *asylum rights extremism* there have been a number of acts of vandalism (including the daubing of messages), especially in the run-up to and during the international No Border Camp (NBC), which was held from 2 to 10 August 2013 in Rotterdam. Once again, *environmental extremists* destroyed a 'test field' of genetically-modified crops. Since 2003 this has happened at least three times a year. Within the spectrum of *animal rights extremism* the establishment of the group '269Life Netherlands' was a noteworthy occurrence. This Dutch group, which is part of an international movement, has committed a number of unlawful acts, such as break-ins at stables and the 'liberation' of animals. In addition, the 269Life movement has attracted international attention by branding its members in public. For some time now, *right-wing extremism* in the Netherlands has tried to increase its following by embracing new issues, largely without success.

Resistance

Previous DTNs have reported a high level of social resistance among the Dutch public to extremism and ideologically motivated violence. This applies to all radical and extremist movements in the Netherlands. There are few violent incidents in which ideological motivations have played a role, and there is little support for extremist groups. There are no indications that this level of resistance has changed in the period under review. With regard to counter-measures, as described in previous DTNs, it is difficult in practice to prevent residents of the Netherlands from leaving the country for jihadist conflict zones. Using criminal law to tackle suspected recruiters and returning jihadist combatants who have joined terrorist organisations and/or committed crimes (including war crimes) is problematic because of the difficulty in gathering evidence.